

## **The end of running and Mustagh Ata speed ascent**

One unusual thing is, that I cannot report of another 100 mile run or the like this year. Seems that age demands its tribute, because since fall of 2007 I was plagued by pain on my Achilles heel after longer or steeper runs. Nothing that would mean any problem or pain in everyday life, but enough to take the fun out of running.

I saw different doctors and various treatments, but nothing seemed to help. Ski touring however had no negative effect, so at least I did enjoy ski touring last winter, climbed a couple of new mountains and managed to do a few steep descents that were so far "missing on my list of exploits". Also I spent a few days of very interesting and nice touring with my friend Ken from the US in Switzerland. The Alpine club of Regensburg (of which I was a member while I was studying at Regensburg university) planned an ski expedition to Mustagh Ata (7550 m) in Western China and I was asked to come along. The timing coincided well with my obligatory company summer vacation and the fact that skiing was much better for my foot than running or mountaineering. So I decided to join them. The travel was full of unforeseen difficulties such as closed borders, lost equipment or frequent snowfall, but in the end all turned out well for me. For years I had thought about this mountain, since it probably is the highest relatively easy skiable mountain where the expenses are not as outrageous as for climbing an 8000 m peak. Some Germans from the ski touring national team had climbed the mountain in a speed fashion in something like 9 and 8 hours from basecamp in the two previous years. so my goal was set: try to do in one go, in something like 12 hours or less.

In the end there were not enough people to join the Regensburg expedition so that it was decided to do a joint expedition with a group from Hamburg and a commercial program from the German alpine club (summit club). I was afraid this mixture might cause problems on the mountains since I had seen commercial groups before where personality clashes joined mountaineering incompetence. Fortunately this was not the case in our group. We all worked very well together, and we had a good time, even though the training and mountaineering knowledge were very variable amongst the participants. Generally we had frequent snowfall and only two fine weather windows during which a summit attack was possible without taking too much risk. The first window came just as I felt well enough acclimatized. So I took my chance, left the others in camp 1 (they had decided to rest one more day before pushing further). Also, I had decided not build a camp 3 as the others had intended, but climb directly from camp 2 to the summit. This worked out perfectly, I had a nice day and managed to reach the summit completely on my own, in good conditions, but having to break trail all the way to the summit in several inches of new snow. From the summit I descended directly to camp 1, which -despite of the altitude- was fun in the layer of fresh powder. The next day I took everything except skis and ski boots down from camp 1 to the basecamp in fairly miserable weather. I had just managed to reach the summit before the weather turned bad!!!. After a day of rest in basecamp at fair weather it seemed that just another nice day was coming up. We had satellite phone and could access

the personalized weather report from the Innsbruck meteorological station, which all other expeditions reported to be excellent. In our case however the report was generally off by at least a day and in general not really much of a help. So I went by my personal judgement and didn't risk spending a second day in basecamp for recovering but decided to do my speed attempt the following day. This should bring me on the same day to the summit than the others from their camp 3. about 3:30 in the morning I started from basecamp at 4400 m in runners up to the glacier with my ski deposit at 5200m. This I reached at dawn, took a short break and reached camp 2 at about 9 in the morning. To my surprise the others were still in this camp 2 having their breakfast. Due to the bad weather they had not managed to build up camp 3 in time and were a day delayed. So I had to continue to break trail (nearly every night there were a few inches of new snow and the wind would cover up the old tracks anyway) through a few inches of snow. This was not really hard work but enough to be a little more tedious than it would have been without. When reaching 7000m, slowly bad weather clouds moved in and it turned out to become a race between me and the worsening conditions.

Just as I reached the summit after 13 hrs of climb the clouds got me and visibility was down to zero. Mustagh Ata is bare of any clear features that one could use for orientation and therefore good visibility is essential not to completely lose track and descend to the wrong valley or worse fall over the cliff on the S side of the climbing route. With the help of the waypoints taken with my GPS on the first ascent I worked my way down a few 100m of elevation where fortunately visibility improved and skiing became truly fun with a very light pack, first in powder and later in corn snow down to the snow line at 5100m. Just in time for dinner I was back at 7pm in base camp.